

Some of the Secrets of the Minx

The Sphinx and Her Circle, by Violet Wyndham (Vanguard. 128 pp. \$4.50), recreates the scintillating world of Ada Levenson, whose support of Oscar Wilde during his trials brought her fame but overshadowed her own talents. Harry T. Moore teaches at Southern Illinois University.

By HARRY T. MOORE

WHEN Oscar Wilde called women "sphinxes without secrets," he was using the word *sphinx* in a different sense from when he applied it to a brilliant friend who had parodied his poem "The Sphinx" in *Punch* as "The Minx." As the daughter of this friend notes in the present book, it is ironic that Ada Levenson should be known mostly because she and her husband sheltered Wilde between his court trials in 1895. Certainly Mrs. Levenson (1861-1933) deserves to be recognized in her own right, both as a personality and as an author.

Violet Wyndham reports that her mother, to whom she usually refers by Wilde's nickname, was unhappily married and took lovers, some of whom are named here. There was, for example, the Earl of Desart, a handsome poet whose yacht put into Monte Carlo when the Sphinx was there, and soon went back to sea with the golden-haired beauty aboard. "Ernest [Levenson] saw no harm in his wife sailing away on a week's cruise with another man. He preferred to remain near the Casino. Lady Desart had recently left her husband for an actor named Sugden." Yet the Sphinx couldn't bring herself to break permanently with her husband; she followed the Victorian fashion of having affairs rather than divorces. When she fell in love with the publisher Grant Richards, she obeyed his command to write the novels which in current reprints still earn praise for their urbanity. Another of her friends, George Moore, had his usual bad luck with her; although she found him charming, she rebuffed his advances.

All these stories are deeply enough



Ada Levenson—from the *Yellow Book* to the *Criterion*.

embedded in the customs and costumes of their time to remind us that yesterday's gossip is today's quaintness. If this book is poorly organized, and more a biographical sketch with letters than a genuine biography, the portrait of its heroine is nevertheless a lively one. And the author performs a useful service for today's readers by providing background material on the people she introduces. Some of them appear only briefly: W. Somerset Maugham because when he wrote to the Sphinx he always misspelled the name with a "y"; Henry James because on the occasion of meeting her he uttered one of his spiraling sentences, and Theodore Dreiser, a surprising addition to the gallery, represented here by a short letter. Various other acquaintances of Ada Levenson receive fuller treatment, from Max Beerbohm and Alfred Douglas to the ebullient Sitwells.

One of the values of this little book lies in its linking of different periods of British society and artistic expression in its picture of the remarkable bluestocking who in the 1890s wrote for the emblematic *Yellow Book* and in the 1920s for T. S. Eliot's stately *Criterion*.

A consistently legendary figure, she is inevitably the center of numerous anecdotes that demonstrate her wit. To conclude with one which shows how she could keep up with Oscar Wilde in that department: When he told her that a devoted *apache* used to follow him about Paris with a knife in one hand, Ada Levenson replied, "I'm sure he had a fork in the other!"

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

Column Two should read: 5, 6, 4, 10, 2, 7, 3, 1, 8, 9.

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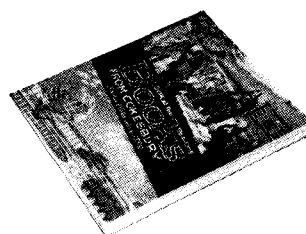
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Falcons and Famous Friends

Not Under Oath: Recollections and Reflections, by John Kieran (Houghton Mifflin. 282 pp. \$5), explores the memories of a self-styled "country boy" who spent much of his life at the center of the world's busiest city. Robert L. Perkin was for many years book review editor of the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver.

By ROBERT L. PERKIN

ALMOST anyone of a certain age remembers the lively good fun of the old *Information, Please!* radio program, back in those prewar years before broadcast entertainment became dedicated to lowest common denominators. One voice in that group of experts on all things imaginable had, as my ear remembers it, a nasal New York twang, and kept popping up with quiet good sense and right answers whenever the questioning got around to natural history, English verse, Latin inscriptions, or sports of any kind. This brisk, acid-tart voice, reminding one of the taste of a Spitzenburg apple, contrasted admirably with the gravelly rumbles of F.P.A., the brash and often venomous brilliance of Oscar Levant, and Clifton Fadiman's suave erudition.

Information, Please! has passed into the realm of pleasant memories, but the

man with the Spitzenburg voice, now in the active practice of subjective ornithology at Cape Ann, has brightened and warmed the fall book season with a most delightful memoir. *Not Under Oath* has the richness, the color, and the zest of autumn weather, and it explains why so many men and women love John Kieran.

The book is a series of informal autobiographical essays, familiar, loosely chronological, pleasantly engaging. Its recollections extend from gaslights in the Bronx to jet planes and the latest feathered migrant to visit Folly Cove.

Kieran was born in New York City. His father was president of Hunter College and a firm believer in good English usage at table. The boyhood days alternated between then semi-rural Kingsbridge and the family farm in Dutchess County, and Kieran insists he was a country boy all the time. Today, he watches with his binoculars the sea, the shore, and the trees above Beech Grove Cemetery at Rockport, Massachusetts, in "calm contentment," he reports, employing in the same sentence a characteristic word: "eager."

In between the gaslights and the buff-breasted sandpipers at Plum Island, the self-certified country boy spent a busy urban life close to everything that seethed or bubbled in the world's most active city. A *cum laude* degree from Fordham was followed by fast-paced



—Brooks Atkinson (from the book).

John Kieran—"A low sun, a long shadow, and one last look before starting home."

An Illustrated History of FURNISHING From the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century by MARIO PRAZ

The author of *The Romantic Agony* has written an engaging history of people at home, of their styles of furnishing and decoration, through five centuries. To illustrate his theme, Mario Praz has not used period rooms photographed as they exist today, emptied of the life which once filled them. Instead, here are the rooms as they were actually lived in, depicted by the artists who were there, faithfully recording in detail the studios and salons, the boudoirs and banquet halls, the kitchens and bathrooms, the furniture and decorations of their contemporaries. Indispensable to home decorators and lovers of antiques; a truly sumptuous book with 400 illustrations, 66 in full color. 9 1/2" x 12" \$25.00

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The Words THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JEAN-PAUL Sartre

A new book by Jean-Paul Sartre is always an event; his latest — THE WORDS — has been the sensation of the season in Paris, where it has been the leading best seller and in fact has sold some 200,000 copies to date. It is true that not since Voltaire has our civilization produced a writer so humane, so manifold, so "engaged" a man of letters as Sartre. But perhaps the reason for the huge popular success of THE WORDS is that it is first and foremost a family story: the story of a boy and his widowed mother, a kin of Albert Schweitzer's — a child who was "created on the run" by a father who died prematurely, and thus came to feel that he was "the child of a miracle" — a boyhood spent in "paradise" where the only man was a gray-bearded grandfather who "so resembled God the Father that he was often taken for Him." Sartre, as Matthieu Galey writes in *Arts*, "makes a movie of himself, and the film is fascinating."

\$5.00

George Braziller
PUBLISHER, NEW YORK